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## Nicaragua: UN expert deplores spate of attacks and arrests of human rights defenders

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GENEVA (3 June 2021) - A UN expert today called on the Government of Nicaragua to put an end to increasing attacks by its security forces against human rights defenders, and to stop detaining them arbitrarily.

There has been a new spate of arrests and attacks following the third anniversary of widespread protests that broke out in April 2018 over planned social security reforms, the lack of state response to the fire in the Indio Maíz Nature Reserve and in response to the violent repression of protesters. The 18 April anniversary has often been a flashpoint.

"Nicaragua must not criminalise legitimate practices such as participation in peaceful protests," said Mary Lawlor, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders. "The State should refrain from initiating criminal proceedings based on generic or disproportionate charges."

She drew attention to two defenders, Celia Cruz and John Christopher Cerna Zúñiga, who have reportedly suffered ill treatment in prison.

Celia Cruz, a trans woman and human rights defender, was detained on 21 April 2020 following protests in Ometepe, an island in Lake Nicaragua. Despite her gender identify, Ms. Cruz was held in an all-male prison, which exposed her to sexual assault and verbal violence. She was released more than a year later, on 25 April 2021.

John Christopher Cerna Zúñiga, a student leader and human rights defender arrested in February 2020, was sentenced to 12 years in prison on allegedly trumped-up charges of drug trafficking aimed at preventing him from working as a human rights defender.

Reports received indicate that they were ill-treated in prison, denied medical care, attacked and sexually assaulted. Also, that people who protest against the Government are put into maximum security cells with increased surveillance, searches, and isolation.

Nicaraguan human rights defenders are still trying to get truth, justice and reparations for those killed during the 2018 protests, and Lawlor said this is particularly important ahead of general elections scheduled for November this year.

"Nicaragua must redouble its efforts to guarantee the right of human rights defenders to peaceful assembly and the right to defend rights, said Lawlor. "The work of defenders is more essential than ever. Their role in protecting human rights and assisting vulnerable populations must be protected, not undermined."

The Rapporteur is in contact with the Nicaraguan authorities on this issue.

The expert's call was endorsed by: **Mr. Clement Nyaletsossi Voule**, *Special Rapporteur on the right to peaceful assembly and association*; **Ms. Tlaleng Mofokeng**, *Special Rapporteur on the right to physical and mental health*; **Mr. Victor Madrigal-Broloz**, *Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity* and **Mr. Nils Melzer**, *Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment*.

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**Ms. Mary Lawlor** (Ireland) is the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders. She is currently an Adjunct Professor of Business and Human Rights in Trinity College Dublin. She was the founder of Front-Line Defenders - the International Foundation for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders. As Executive Director from 2001-2016, she represented Front Line Defenders and had a key role in its development. Ms. Lawlor was previously Director of the Irish Office of Amnesty International from 1988 to 2000, after becoming a member of the Board of Directors 1975 and being elected its President from 1983 to 1987.

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